

The National Cross-Site Evaluation of High-Risk Youth Programs

Overview



Points of
Prevention



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Center for Substance Abuse Prevention
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The National Cross-Site Evaluation of High-Risk Youth Programs

Foreword

This document summarizes the major findings of the National Cross-Site Evaluation of High-Risk Youth Demonstration Grant Programs, funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

The National High-Risk Youth Demonstration Grant Program has been one of the most ambitious and productive of CSAP's funding initiatives. The demonstration grant program focused on identifying promising approaches to prevention and produced knowledge about risk and protective factors related to substance use that helped to identify model programs and best practices for effective prevention. Research and experience in the High-Risk Youth Demonstration Grant Program also contributed to the awareness of the importance of culturally sensitive, age-appropriate, and gender-specific programming.

The findings generated in this report are significant to the substance abuse field.

The findings help us understand how prevention can strengthen conditions that help youth at risk avoid substance abuse. The evaluation confirms that family, peers, school, and community are all important influences on substance use and has moved beyond that knowledge to measure the strength of those influences. By understanding the factors that prevent substance abuse in youth, and producing science-based lessons about effective prevention strategies and program practices, this major research effort holds the promise of more effective prevention and more positive futures for America's youth who are at high risk.

Highlights:

- Substance abuse prevention programs reduce rates of substance use
- Youth already using cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana significantly reduced their use of substances after joining a prevention program
- Gender plays an important role in risk, protection, and substance use
- Family, peers, school, and community can all protect against substance use
- Science-based program components produce consistent and lasting reductions in substance use
- Communities with more opportunities for participation in prevention programs positively impact substance use by youth

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Introduction

Substance abuse is one of the Nation's most pervasive, costly, and challenging health and social problems. The use, and particularly the early use, of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and illicit drugs can contribute to serious personal and social problems including school failure, crime, family violence, and abuse.

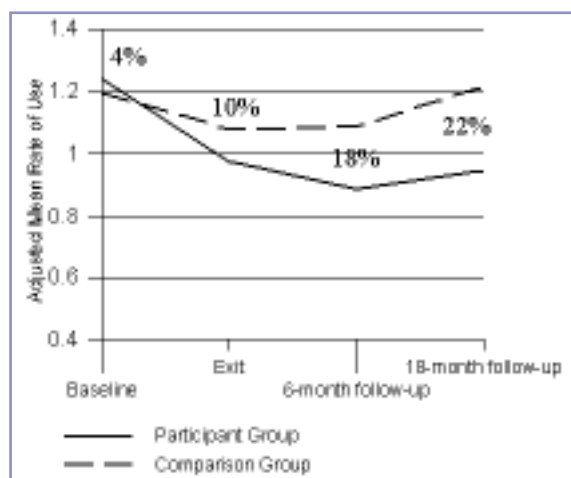
For more than a decade, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) has been the lead Federal agency in developing policies, programs, and services to prevent the onset of illicit drug use, particularly adolescent substance use. As part of the effort, the agency designs, funds, and evaluates programs to generate new knowledge about prevention strategies and activities: how they are designed and implemented, and how effective they are.

CSAP's High-Risk Youth (HRY) Demonstration Grant Program targeted substance use among at-risk youth. Since it began in 1987, CSAP has funded more than 400 High-Risk Youth projects that have created a wealth of knowledge in substance abuse prevention. Demonstration projects have been awarded to community-based organizations, universities, behavioral health providers, and public agencies. These varied groups of grant recipients serve communities that are diverse in location, racial and ethnic composition, and level and nature of risk.

Substance use by participants who reported prior drug use was 10 percent less at program exit than comparison youth, and 22 percent below comparison youth 18 months later.

Figure A

Trends in 30-Day Substance Use Among Youth Who Initiated
Substance Use Prior to Program Entry
(n = 1,235)



The National Cross-Site Evaluation of High-Risk Youth Programs

The National Cross-Site Evaluation of High-Risk Youth Programs is a 5-year evaluation of more than 10,500 at-risk youth. Forty-eight HRY demonstration grant recipients across the Nation participated in the study.¹ These grantees were funded by CSAP to implement and assess programs to prevent and reduce the use of alcohol and illicit drugs among at-risk youth.

¹ CSAP funded 94 programs in 1994 and 1995. Programs were not included in the Cross-Site Evaluation if they served children primarily under the age of 9. Approximately half of the 48 programs that participated in the Cross-Site study were funded in 1994 for 5 years and the other half were funded in 1995 for 3 years. These programs were located throughout 22 states, including Alaska and Hawaii.

Major Findings

Substance abuse prevention programs produce statistically significant reductions in substance use and positively impact the lives of at-risk youth.

1. Substance abuse prevention programs reduce rates of substance use. Youth who took part in CSAP High-Risk Youth prevention programs decreased their alcohol and marijuana use when compared to similar youth who did not participate in the programs. Substance use for participants in CSAP prevention programs was 12 percent less at exit than comparison youth and 6 percent below comparison youth 18 months later. Positive effects of program participation continue for at least 18 months after the program ends.
2. Youth already using cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana significantly reduced their use of substances after joining a prevention program. As shown in the figure, youth who had already started to use cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana before entering a CSAP prevention program reduced their use after joining the program. Substance use by participants who reported prior drug use was 10 percent less at exit than comparison youth, and use levels were 22 percent below comparison youth 18 months later.
3. Gender plays an important role in risk, protection, and substance use. Boys experience lower levels of family supervision than girls in the sample, and neighborhood conditions have more influence on their peer associations and substance use than for girls. Across all programs, substance use outcomes were more positive for boys than for girls at program end, but tended to fade by 18 months later. For girls, effects on substance use emerged later and lasted longer. Despite these differences, programs that used multiple science-based practices identified in the study produced stronger and longer lasting effects for both boys and girls.
4. Family, peers, school, community, and society protect against substance abuse. High-risk youth who were connected to positive social environments such as school, family, peers, community, and society used substances less than those who lacked such connections. For youth at risk, connection to these five interwoven domains clearly plays an important role in effective prevention efforts.
5. Science-based program components produce consistent and lasting reductions in substance use. Six program characteristics were scientifically verified in this study as significantly strengthening program impacts. When programs were characterized by five or more of these science-based practices, they consistently produced stronger and longer lasting positive effects than other programs.
6. Communities with more opportunities for participation in prevention positively impact substance use by youth. Communities that gave young people opportunities to take part in prevention activities had greater positive impact on substance abuse among these youth than communities with fewer prevention opportunities.

Who Was Surveyed?

Across the 48 sites, the study involved more than 10,500 youth—6,031 HRY program participants and 4,579 similar comparison youth who did not receive services from the participating CSAP programs. Approximately two-thirds (66%) of the study youth are female; and over half (57%) are of middle-school age (11 to 13 years old), with the youngest study participants being 9 years of age and the oldest being 18. The programs are in both rural and urban locations, and participants represent the diversity of the Nation's racial and ethnic makeup. More than one-third (36%) of the youth identify themselves as African American; approximately one-fourth (26%) consider themselves to be Hispanic, and the remaining youth are relatively evenly distributed among Native American (13%), non-Hispanic White (12%), and Asian or Pacific Islander (11%) membership.

Conclusion

CSAP's National Cross-Site Evaluation of High-Risk Youth Programs adds important new evaluative information documenting the effectiveness of prevention programming. The evaluation contributes to understanding the factors that prevent substance abuse in youth and producing science-based lessons about effective prevention strategies and program practices.

Methodology

A rigorous research design incorporating lessons from earlier evaluations of prevention program implementation and effectiveness guided the study. This evaluation created an unprecedented opportunity to learn more about effective prevention for youth at risk. The evaluation was initiated with three major objectives:

- Rigorously assess and demonstrate how CSAP-funded HRY programs prevent and reduce substance use among youth at high risk for such behavior.
- Provide systematic information about the role of risk and protective factors in prevention programs, including the linkages between risk and protection and substance use in the HRY target population.
- Systematically document how prevention programs are delivered and implemented, and identify characteristics of effective programs in terms of their setting, design, and implementation.

The large, multiple-site evaluation was designed to assess 48 prevention programs and to identify those program characteristics that are associated with strong prevention outcomes. In addition to individual-level information on substance use, risk, and protection, the evaluation includes detailed information on the nature and amount of prevention services in which each child participated, as well as systematic process information on the study programs.

Study Design

The study design allowed CSAP to test the effectiveness of programs by measuring changes in participants' risk, protection, and substance use over time and comparing the results to changes in similar youth who did not receive program services.

The study implemented a comprehensive and rigorous study design marked by six major features: sample diversity, comparison samples, a common survey instrument, multiple measurement points, program contact data, and program-level measures.

Sites were selected to ensure that the study covered all regions of the country and a broad representation of target population characteristics (for example, age, gender, and racial and ethnic identification). The quality of the program design or implementation was not a selection criterion. The objective was to study programs that represented the range of strategies and capabilities, not just the programs that were promising or proven.

Data collection took place at four points in the study: program entry (baseline), program completion (exit), 6 months after program completion, and 18 months following program completion.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The CSAP National Cross-Site Evaluation of High-Risk Youth Programs provides science-based guidance for improved prevention policy and practice. For policymakers, this rigorous study of a broad range of programs implemented in actual communities demonstrates the effectiveness of prevention for at-risk youth.

Among the findings from the HRY evaluation that will help policymakers are:

- Prevention programs are a proactive step toward preventing or reducing substance use.
- Evaluations like the National Cross-Site study enable policymakers to see who benefits from prevention programming and whether some strategies or approaches will be more effective than others.
- Policymakers benefit when they understand how to incorporate risk and protection objectives into policy design and funding decisions. Prevention professionals benefit from this knowledge in designing projects, programs, and activities.
- The Cross-Site Evaluation identified effective science-based prevention practices so that prevention professionals can continue to design and implement the most effective programs.
- Substance abuse prevention programs designed for specific populations get results and are an effective part of Federal drug control policy.
- CSAP's investment in the development of sound prevention programs benefits youth; prevention works.

For prevention practitioners, the study provides lessons on how prevention programming can be refined and strengthened in several areas. The study findings have important implications for emphases in prevention design and implementation. By contributing to understanding the factors that prevent substance abuse in youth, and producing science-based lessons about effective prevention strategies and program practices, this major research effort holds the promise of more effective prevention and more positive futures for America's high-risk youth.

For teachers, counselors, and other substance abuse prevention practitioners, this research can help identify the “blueprints” of effective practice to help guide their efforts to promote positive youth development. Prevention professionals can use the information generated by CSAP's study to improve their aim at this moving target of approaches. This diverse high-risk study sample provides an excellent proving ground for identifying connective paths among risk and protection factors and substance use. It also provides a basis for assessing the appropriateness of specific prevention objectives and practices in a variety of settings. Among the findings from the cross-site evaluation that will help practitioners nationwide are:

- Prevention is most effective when it focuses on reducing risk and/or strengthening protection in young lives.
- Programs that focused on developing life skills were more effective in reducing substance use than programs that emphasized other program content.
- Programs that involved participants interactively were more effective in reducing substance abuse than programs that relied on passive classroom-style teaching.
- Young men's and young women's risk and protection influences differ, pointing to the need for differing gender-based strategies.
- Programs that combine life skills, interactive delivery, intensive participation, and strong implementation consistently produce stronger and longer lasting positive effects on substance use.

More About CSAP's National Cross-Site Evaluation of High Risk Youth Programs

Scientific study is important in developing guidance for effective substance abuse prevention programming. However, prevention professionals and volunteers also need to know how to make effective prevention practices work in real community settings, typically with limited resources. Designing and implementing effective prevention programs depends on science-based knowledge tempered and shaped by experience and success in actual community settings.

The 48 CSAP High-Risk Youth programs were not selected because they were model programs, nor were they implemented specifically for the purposes of the study. The findings for these programs are not the product of successful studies already published. These are actual programs implemented by a variety of organizations with different resources, staffing, and experience. The programs were implemented in communities at high risk and represent the experience and challenges of programs in these conditions. Not all of the programs succeeded, and of those that did achieve their objectives, some were more successful than others.

Findings from the National Cross-Site Evaluation of High-Risk Youth Programs are particularly important because they provide specific information on what prevention strategies and program practices provide the best results in actual community conditions. Thus, the findings and lessons from the study provide important science-based lessons on how to strengthen prevention programs for youth at high risk. To fully report the many findings and lessons produced by the study, CSAP is publishing a series of Points of Prevention Monographs. This series currently consists of four separate monographs that present information and findings on major issues that designers and implementers of prevention programs as well as prevention researchers and evaluators may consider in their work to make prevention more effective.

- Points of Prevention Monograph No. 1, Preventing Substance Abuse: Major Findings from the National Cross-Site Evaluation of High-Risk Youth Programs, provides an overview of the study purposes, design, and findings. The monograph presents the major findings, explains the data and analysis that support them, and identifies major implications for prevention knowledge.
- Points of Prevention Monograph No. 2, Understanding Risk, Protection, and Substance Use Among High-Risk Youth, summarizes information on external and internal risk and protective factors in the high-risk youth in the study sample, identifies trends in these factors as youth get older, and explicates the interwoven “web of influence” of these factors on substance use.
- Points of Prevention Monograph No. 3, Findings on Designing and Implementing Effective Prevention Programs for Youth at High Risk, provides information comparing the effectiveness of the 48 study programs in achieving outcome objectives. It also includes detailed information comparing these programs on their strategies and activities. This information is used to provide science-based answers to questions about what makes prevention programs effective for youth at high risk. The most important product of prevention studies is to provide practical information that designers and implementers of prevention efforts can use to benefit the youth they serve. This monograph concludes with guides and considerations for strengthening prevention programs and activities.
- Points of Prevention Monograph No. 4, Making Prevention Effective for Adolescent Boys and Girls: Gender Differences in Substance Use and Prevention, utilizes the study's large sample to identify similarities and differences between boys and girls in substance use, risk and protection, and response to prevention program participation. The monograph includes implications for designing prevention programs that are more effective for both boys and girls.

Additional Resources

CSAP has recently published the following documents to assist practitioners and others involved in the selection and implementation of science-based substance abuse prevention programs:

- Science-Based Substance Abuse Prevention: A Guide
- Promising and Proven Substance Abuse Prevention Programs
- Principles of Substance Abuse Prevention

These documents can be obtained through the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI) or through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Web site, www.samhsa.gov.

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